The True Tragedy of Richard Duke of York

The Third Part of King Henry the Sixt
with the death of the Duke of YORKE

The earliest date for the version of this play printed in octavo format as *The True Tragedy of Richard Duke of York* is probably 1577, when the first edition of Holinshed was published. The latest possible date for the play is the allusion in *Groatsworth of Wit* in August 1592.

**Publication Date**

No play was ever registered under the title *The True Tragedy of Richard Duke of York*. Some have seen this as evidence that the copy may have been obtained surreptitiously. Blayney, however, reports that, in the 1590s, about one third of published plays had not been registered.

*The True Tragedy of Richard Duke of York* was first published in 1595 and editors refer to this play as *The True Tragedy* (e.g. Cox & Rasmussen) or as *Richard Duke of York* (e.g. Wells and Taylor). The version printed in the 1623 First Folio was called *Henry VI Part 3*. Unique among the publications of Shakespeare’s plays, *The True Tragedy of Richard Duke of York* was first published in 1595 in octavo (herein referred to as O1, but elsewhere called Q1):

[O1 1595] The true Tragedie of Richard Duke of Yorke, and the death of good King Henrie Sixt, with the whole contention betweene the two Houses Lancaster and Yorke, as it was sundrie times acted by the Right Honourable the Earle of Pembrooke his seruantes. Printed at London by P[eter] S[hort] for Thomas Millington, and are to be sold at his shoppe vnder Saint Peters Church in Cornwal. 1595.

A second version appeared in quarto in 1600 (Q2) still without naming an author:

[Q2 1600] The True Tragedie of Richard Duke of Yorke, and the death of good King Henrie the sixt: With the whole contention betweene the two Houses, Lancaster and Yorke; as it was sundry times acted by the Right Honourable the Earle of Pembroke his seruantes.

It is likely that the earliest entry in the Stationers’ Register for this play was in 1602:

[SR 1602] 19 Aprilis. Thomas Pavier. Entred for his copies by assignement from Thomas Millington these books following, Saluo Jure cuiuscunque viz. . . the firste and Second parte of Henry the vj’ ij bookes xij°.

The “firste and Second parte of Henry the vj” is usually taken to refer to *The First Part of the Contention* and *The True Tragedy of Richard Duke of York*, (i.e. 2, 3 *Henry VI*) which had already appeared in print.

The two plays *The First Part of the Contention* (2H6) and *The True Tragedy* (3H6) were first published together in 1619 (Q3), when they were ascribed to Shakespeare for the first time:


The Stationers’ Register records another *Henry VI* in 1623, usually taken to be *I Henry VI*, which had not yet appeared in print:
The title page to the anonymous first octavo of *True Tragedie of Richard Duke of York*, 1595. Although the narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece* were printed in octavo, this is the only Shakespeare play to appear in the smaller format. By permission of Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, shelfmark Arch. G f.1, title page.


The play was published in an expanded form in the First Folio:

[F1 1623] The third Part of Henry the Sixt with the death of the Duke of Yorke.

*The True Tragedy* (O1) contains 2,313 lines, which amount to about two-thirds of the text of *The Third Part of King Henry the Sixt (3 Henry VI)* in the F1 version (3,217 lines). This proportion is similar when comparing *The Contention* with *2 Henry VI*. Q2 appears to follow O1, but with numerous corrections for mis-lineations. Q3 follows both O1 and Q2. Q3 is part of a collection of ten plays attributed to Shakespeare, printed by Jaggard and published by Pavier. Cairncross believes that O1 was a version shortened by Pembroke’s Men for touring the provinces in 1592, as he believes had happened with *The First Part of the Contention* (Q1 of 2 Henry VI) and *Richard III* (Q1, 1597).

**Performance Dates**

The play seems to have been current before September 1592, as evidenced in the passing comment by Robert Greene in *Groatsworth of Wit*:

Yet trust them not: for there is an up-start Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you: and beeing an absolute Johannes fac totum, is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a countrey.

The phrase *Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde*
appears to parody a line from *True Tragedy*: “Oh Tygers hart wrapt in a womans hide?” [TLN 603], spoken by a very bitter Duke of York to the sadistic Queen Margaret. It appears that the author of *Groatsworth* (whether Greene or Chettle) not only knew the line from the play but also expected his audience to recognise it as well. It would thus suggest that *True Tragedy* was well known in 1592, but since the same line appears in F1 “Oh Tygers heart, wrapt in a Womans Hide,” [1.4.137; TLN 603] it is unclear whether the Groatsworth-author is referring to the shorter (octavo) version or the longer (folio) version.

The play had been “sundry times acted by the Right Honourable the Earle of Pembrooke his seruantes” by 1595 as stated on the title page of O1. Chambers (ES ii 128) reports what little is known about Pembroke’s Men, their performances of plays such as the anonymous *Taming of A Shrew* (SR/ Q 1594) and their patron, Henry Herbert, 2nd Earl of Pembroke, (c. 1534 – 1601). Meres does not mention any play about Henry VI (neither *The Contention* nor *True Tragedy*). It is possible that the attribution was unknown, or that the plays were thought inferior, or that Meres simply omitted them from his balanced list of six comedies and six tragedies, or perhaps, as Chambers suggests (245), possibly because he arrived in London in 1597 after its last performance (dated 1593 by Chambers) or because of multiple authorship (Wells & Taylor). Meres does, however, mention *Richard III*.

There is no evidence as to the sequence of composition. It is usually thought that the playwright made one plan for both *The First Part of the Contention* and *The True Tragedy of Richard Duke of York*, (i.e. both 2 & 3 *Henry VI*), not just because of the word ‘First’ in the title but also because the events move across much more smoothly between *Parts 2 & 3* than between *Parts 1 & 2*. Major discrepancies between *Part 1* and *Part 2* have strongly suggested that *Part 1* was written later as a prequel (see previous chapters). Both Chambers and Bullough (followed by many others, e.g. Tillyard, Cairncross), however, believe that the three parts of *Henry VI* and *Richard III* were planned in sequence as a tetralogy.

It is likely that Shakespeare planned at least three plays in one sweep (2, 3 *Henry VI*–*Richard III*) considering that Richard Duke of Gloucester plays an increasingly important part in *3 Henry VI*, clearly anticipating his machinations towards the crown, e.g. 3H6, 3.2.168–172:

> I’ll make my heaven to dream upon the crown,  
> And, whiles I live, to account this world but  
> hell,  
> Until my mis-shaped trunk that bears this  
> head  
> Be round impaled with a glorious crown.  
> And yet I know not how to get the crown.

Gloucester’s soliloquy in *3 Henry VI* (the longest in Shakespeare and echoed in the opening of *Richard III*) would make no sense unless it were anticipating Richard’s becoming king.

There is no evidence as to whether O1 represents an early version, later revised into the text underlying F1, or whether O1 is an inferior version of the play. As with *Parts 1, 2* the nineteenth-century commentators, ‘revisionists’, believed that O1 was an early version, later revised for F1 as *3 Henry VI*. The octavo text appears to follow Hall (e.g. 5.4–5) whereas the Folio follows Holinshed in more respects. In the twentieth century, Alexander proposed and other commentators have followed, that the O1 *True Tragedy* was a memorial reconstruction (as with *The Contention*: see previous chapter on 2 *Henry VI*). Hattaway believes that *The Contention* and *The True Tragedy* were cut versions used for touring purposes, since producing three full plays about Henry VI would have been difficult.

There is, however, a growing consensus that the so-called “Bad Quartos” are in fact good versions of the play (as argued by Maguire) and that the dramatist produced a longer, more literary version of the play which appeared in the Folio (as argued by Erne). Like Roger Warren in his introduction to *2 Henry VI*, Randall Martin proposes that O is a memorial reconstruction of an earlier text and that the dramatist revised and expanded it into the longer Folio text. Similarly, the editors of the recent Arden 3 edition have developed this view: Cox & Rasmussen cautiously suggest that O1 is a full and complete play in its own right. They point out that various readings in O1 (against F1) coincide with Hall, e.g. in spellings, the number of troops and York’s regency in Normandy. They tend to believe that O1 is an earlier version by Shakespeare and F1 is a later revision. They quote Blayney, who suggests that *True Tragedy* might have been a transcript made by an early actor for
friends, using an authorial manuscript. However they add a caveat:

We are mindful that subjective editorial opinions about a text's origin – too often mistaken for bibliographic facts – can have a profound effect on a reader's interpretation of that text; we do not want to prejudice interpretation by pronouncing one text more authoritative than the other or even by attaching such labels as original and revision. (Cox & Rasmussen, 175–6)

**Attribution**

O1 is anonymous, as is the case with quartos printed before 1598; unusually Q2 is also anonymous, despite its date in 1600, after other plays such as Richard III, had been ascribed to Shakespeare. In fact, the play was not attributed to Shakespeare until Pavier’s collection of 10 plays in Q3, 1619. As noted in the previous chapter, Tillyard, Cairncross and Chambers agreed on Shakespeare’s sole authorship of the Henry VI trilogy as an author promoting the ‘Tudor myth’. Henry’s prophecy at 4.6.68 about the future greatness of Richmond suggests some adherence on the author’s part to the established view of history. Edmond Malone in 1790 suggested that The Contention was written by Greene and others, and later revised by Shakespeare into 3 Henry VI. J. Dover Wilson proposed that Shakespeare revised the work of Greene, Nashe and Peele. Wells & Taylor believe Shakespeare wrote the play in collaboration with others, a view which is cautiously accepted by Cox & Rasmussen.¹

**Sources**

Bullough cites the same principal historical sources for Henry VI Part 3 as for Parts 1 & 2:

**Edward Hall, The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancastre and Yorke** (1548–50). Bullough sees Hall as the primary source for the tetralogy as a whole and especially for this play. York’s rebellion against Henry and his capture in the Battle of Wakefield (1.3) are derived from Hall. Hattaway lists other scenes 2.5, 4.1, 4.7 and 4.8 which derive from Hall.

**Raphael Holinshed, The Chronicles of Englane, Scotia, and Irelande** (1st ed. 1577 & 2nd ed. 1587). Bullough demonstrates how Holinshed provided some of the details for the play, e.g. Clifford’s revenge on York (1.4). Hattaway lists other scenes which seem to owe more to Holinshed (e.g. 3.2, 5.1). Boswell-Stone has demonstrated that for the text of 3 Henry VI, Shakespeare used the second edition of Holinshed. McKerrow argues that Shakespeare used the first edition of Holinshed for The Contention of York and Lancaster and by implication The True Tragedy, which most editors believe was composed at the same time. King establishes that Shakespeare used the second edition of Holinshed for the Folio texts of Parts 2 & 3.²

Other chronicles which may have been consulted include Richard Grafton, A Chronicle at Large and Meere History of the Affayres of Englelande (1569), which is largely derivative of Hall, and Robert Fabyan The New Chronicles of England and France (1516), which is taken as the source at 3.3 when Queen Margaret appeals to the French King for help. At 4.6, King Henry forgives the lieutenant, who in A Mirrour for Magistrates had been blamed for all the official crimes under Edward IV. Michel suggests that Samuel Daniel’s Civil Wars (1594–5) was used for material not in the chronicles, including King Henry on the molehill at Towton depicted in 2.5 and Edward’s wooing of Lady Grey in 3.2.³ These suggestions are ignored by Cairncross, Bullough and Cox & Rasmussen in their commentaries. Following Michel, who argued that the influence between Daniel and Shakespeare operated in both directions, we can suggest either that Shakespeare obtained his details elsewhere and influenced Daniel, or that these passages were later revisions before the publication of The True Tragedy in 1595. In general, Hall is the main source.

Shaheen discusses Biblical references in 3 Henry VI. He shows that Shakespeare introduced his own religious references, but not as many as in other plays. He notes that when an individual version can be identified, the author appears to favour the Geneva Bible as at 1.1.42: “Henry, whose cowardice hath made us by-words to our enemies.” Shaheen notes that the author retains the wording of the Geneva Bible at Ps 44.15: “Thou makest us to be a byworde among the heathen.” The word “proverb” is used in other translations.

Some classical sources were used including Ovid’s Heroides, which is quoted accurately
and without a gloss at 1.3.37: “Di faciant laudis summa sit ista tuae.” (‘The gods grant that this may be the height of your glory’) uttered by Rutland when fatally wounded by Clifford. Both Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and Golding’s translation are recalled at various points, e.g. in Gloucester’s soliloquy in 3.2, when he complains that he is “like to a chaos or an unlicked bear whelp, that carries no impression like the dam” (3.2.160–1); *c.f.* Golding *Met.* 15.416ff who has: “The Bear whelp . . . like an evil favoured lump of flesh aluye dooth lye. / The dam by licking shapeth out his members orderly.” There are possibly other allusions, e.g. to Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Further classical influence has been traced from Seneca’s tragedies, especially in the violent revenge of Gloucester. Seneca’s influence in the use of prophecy, dreams and premonitions has also been seen in *Part 3* and in *Richard III*. Further, the use of declamations in at least ten speeches seems particularly Senecan (as reported by Cox & Rasmussen, 96–7).

Allusions to English literary works are rare, but include Henry’s description of the contending forces of Nature may be taken from *Gorboduc* (1561). Queen Margaret’s attempt to rally her supporters in the face of imminent loss (5.4) appears to derive some phrases from Brooke’s *Tragical History of Romeus & Juliet* (1562) lines 1359–77.

**Orthodox Date**

Chambers suggested that *3 Henry VI* was composed in 1590 and in this he was followed by Honigmann. Other scholars proposed a date of 1591 (Dover Wilson, Caincross, Hammond, Born, Wells & Taylor, Hattaway, Cox & Rasmussen, Martin), with Bullough opting for a later date of 1592. Commentators are agreed that *3 Henry VI* is one of the earliest plays in the canon. Like *Part 1*, *Part 3* is composed entirely in verse. As with *Part 2* there is a high number of feminine endings (14%), but a low incidence of open-ended (i.e. run-on) lines at 10%, and mid-line speech endings at 1%. As there is doubt about the sole authorship, tests remain unreliable.

**External Orthodox Evidence**

In the nineteenth century, there were attempts to link events in *3 Henry VI* with the anonymous pamphlet *Leicester’s Commonwealth* (1586), e.g. the appearance of Somerville in 5.1.7 with the execution of Sir John Somerville in 1583. Against this, David Bevington and Edna Boris have argued that the history plays in general refer to contemporary ideas on authority and law, rather than specific events or squabbles. More recently, however, commentators have seen Shakespeare as profoundly reflecting contemporary issues of religion and politics. Richard Dutton et al. state (112) that Shakespeare’s portrayal of Somerville in *3 Henry VI* seems to “present a coded portrait challenging the official verdict on his contemporary namesake.” Andrew Hadfield has made a case that Shakespeare did intend to relate his plays to contemporary issues of Kingship and Republicanism, dating the *Henry VI* plays to the late 1580s.

**Oxfordian Dating**

The usual dating from an Oxfordian perspective for the whole *Henry VI* trilogy is the period 1586–88, from when the Queen granted Oxford a £1000 annuity (Nelson, 300–2) until the arrival of the Spanish Armada. According to this view, Oxford was paid to write patriotic drama demonstrating the need to unite against a common enemy and the dire consequences of being divided. Eva Turner Clark favours an earlier date because she sees allusions to Mary Queen of Scots and suggests that a court performance on 27 Dec 1580 by the Lord Chamberlain’s Men was of an early version of this play.

**Internal Oxfordian Evidence**

The earliest date is usually taken to be the publication of the second edition of Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, but since Shakespeare independently...
used material from a source used by Holinshed’s editors, it is possible that the earlier date of 1577 may apply. Arthur Golding’s translation of Ovid’s Metamorphosis (1567) appears to be echoed at 3.2 in Gloucester’s soliloquy. Golding was Oxford’s maternal uncle and a member of Cecil’s household during Oxford’s wardship (Nelson, 39–41). The author’s use of the Geneva Bible also suggests Oxford, who had bought a copy in 1569 (Nelson, 53).

**External Oxfordian Evidence**

Eva Turner Clark adduces parallels between events at court in December 1580 and 3 Henry VI. In particular, she sees a close link between the catholic factions of Henry Howard and Charles Arundel, one time friends of Oxford, and the anti-Henry conspiracies. She notes that just as Elizabeth’s detractors asserted that she had no right to the throne, so the Yorkists had railed against Henry VI. Until 1580, Elizabeth had generally shown tolerance towards the Catholics, The author in 3 Henry VI appears to demonstrate that this policy was unwise. A performance of the play c. 1580 ties in with a hardening of her attitude and with the arrest of Edmund Campion.5

Oxford himself was arrested following accusations of treasonable catholic leanings. (Nelson, 164–73 and 203–9). Clark argues that this led him to include a favourable portrait of his forbear, John de Vere, thirteenth earl of Oxford, (1442–1513) who had been one of Henry VI’s biggest supporters and a (some historians say the) key commander of Richard’s forces at the Battle of Bosworth. In 3 Henry VI at 3.3.106–7, the character Oxford exclaims: “While life upholds this arm, This arm upholds the house of Lancaster.” In their commentary, Cox & Rasmussen suggest: “Oxford would seem to be included in this fictitious scene for the sole purpose of stating his motive of personal revenge.” Clark suggests that, at this point, Edward the seventeenth earl was making the character of John, the thirteenth earl, firmly promote his family’s loyalty to the House of Lancaster and by implication to the Tudor dynasty.

**Conclusion**

The play can only be dated between 1577 and 1592. The earliest date for the version of the play printed in octavo format as The True Tragedy of Richard Duke of York is probably 1577, when the first edition of Holinshed was published. The earliest date for the version printed in the First Folio as The Third Part of King Henry the Sixth (3 Henry VI) is 1587, the second edition of Holinshed.

The latest possible date for the play is the allusion in Groatsworth of Wit in August 1592, with a possible revision of the text underlying F1 about 1595 under the influence of Daniel.

**Notes**

1. Sir Brian Vickers in Shakespeare, Co-author (OUP 2002) refers only briefly to the possibility that 3 Henry VI might have been composed by two or more authors.

2. Oxford University Press has approved an ambitious project to produce The Oxford Handbook to Holinshed’s Chronicles edited by Paulina Kewes, Felicity Heal, and Ian Archer. This handbook will relate the Chronicles to the historiography and literature of the medieval, early modern and subsequent periods. The parallel texts of the 1577 and 1587 editions are now available, enabling a comparison of the two versions both by regnal years and by Holinshed’s original chapter structure. (http://www.cems.ox.ac.uk/holinshed/texts.shtml (accessed 22 October 2009).

3. Gillian Wiley “The Politics of Revision in Samuel Daniel’s The Civil Wars” in English Literary Renaissance, 28 (2008, 461–83) has traced the change in Daniel’s political priorities through the revised editions, especially evident in his treatment of Elizabeth Grey and Edward IV (1609 edition, Book VIII); at first Daniel, like Shakespeare at 3 Henry VI, 3.2.72, showed Elizabeth’s resistance in terms of her own honesty. Later Daniel “departs from the poet’s sources in representing Grey’s resistance to Edward’s attempted seduction in explicitly politicized terms.” Wiley is unsure whether Shakespeare influenced Daniel or vice versa, e.g. “Shakespeare, possibly following Daniel, similarly emphasizes Blunt’s valor in I Henry IV.”

and Rasmussen. For discussion on *Leicester’s Commonwealth*, see the edition by D. C. Peck (Ohio University Press, 1985). Nina Green in an internet essay has noted that in *Leicester’s Commonwealth*, Robert Dudley is described as a *dominus fac totum* (“a master who does everything”) as a satire on his influence over the Queen. She draws the parallel with the description in *Groatsworth of Wit* of the “upstart crow” portrayed as a “*Johannes fac totum*” (http://www.oxford-shakespeare.com/Newsletters/Groatsworth-03.pdf, accessed on 22 October 2009).

5. These events are well documented by modern historians, e.g. Alison Weir, in *Elizabeth the Queen* (1999: 333–5). See also the discussion on equivocation in the chapter on *Macbeth* in this work (pp. 371–2).

**Other Cited Works**

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